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# From Further Education to Higher Education: Social Work Students' Experiences of Transition to an Ancient, Research-Led University

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## **From Further Education to Higher Education: Social Work Students' Experiences of Transition to an Ancient, Research-Led University**

### **Abstract**

In 2004, as part of its initiative to widen access, a Scottish university offered places for the first time to a group of students coming from further education (FE) colleges with Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs). A longitudinal study has followed the experiences of transition and subsequent progression of this cohort of students. The study, entitled 'From FE to HE' has interviewed and surveyed 45 students at key points since 2004. This paper reports on findings from the study overall, giving particular attention to the views and experiences of the nine Social Work students within the cohort. It will be argued that whilst FE colleges provide considerable support for their students, there is no easy transition to an ancient, research-led university such as this one. The findings of this study have implications for all those involved in social work education.

**Keywords:** Further Education, Transition, Profession, Higher Education, Widening Participation

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## **Introduction**

Widening access is one of the key policy objectives of universities in the UK; encouraging further education (FE) students to enter higher education (HE) has been identified as one of the means of achieving that end (Osborne, 2003; Gorard et al., 2006). This paper will briefly consider the educational context of this initiative, before going on to present the findings from one longitudinal study of progression ('From FE to HE') that is currently investigating the experiences of 45 FE students who began degree programmes at an ancient university in Scotland in 2004 with Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Higher National Diplomas (HNDs). The paper will explore the students' reported experiences of transition to HE, giving particular attention to the feedback of the nine Social Work students in the cohort. It is acknowledged that it is not possible to draw major conclusions on the basis of evidence from only nine students. Nevertheless, the Social Work students' experiences are found to have much in common with other students coming from a FE background, as well as other students more generally, thus giving useful pointers for the delivery of higher education (and hence social work education) in the future.

## **Educational Context**

Recent interest in transitions from further education (FE) to higher education (HE) must be placed in the context of the wider policy drive to widen access to students who had previously been marginalised within, or excluded from, HE. Participation in HE in the UK has increased rapidly during the twentieth century, however research has shown that those from socio-economic groups III<sub>m</sub>, IV and V (skilled-manual, semi-skilled and unskilled workers) remain seriously under-represented in HE (Gilchrist et al., 2003; HEFCE, 2003). Research has also demonstrated that students enter into a highly differentiated HE system, with those in the old, 'elite' universities twice as likely to come from middle or upper class families as those starting in the post-1992 sector (SFCFHE, 2004). Although Scotland has a higher participation rate than any other country in the UK, with over 50% of young people entering full-time HE, around a quarter of all those who are counted as 'HE students' are not, in fact, at university (and hence are not studying degree programmes). Instead, they are studying Higher National (HN) courses at FE colleges, and it is the FE colleges that have had most success in attracting students from a wide range of social backgrounds. Universities

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(and some more than others) remain solidly middle-class institutions. Recent statistics suggest that whilst only 31% of school leavers went directly into HE from state-funded schools in Scotland, the equivalent figure for private schools was 83% (SFCFHE, 2004, p. 81). These figures demonstrate an overwhelming case for initiatives which promote the educational chances of working-class students. Since FE colleges remain central to this, the importance of students making successful transitions to university cannot be overstated. The university in which this study is located is a member of the Russell Group of research-intensive universities in the UK.<sup>1</sup> It routinely attracts a large number of applications from well-qualified students and as a consequence, admissions across most parts of the university have been focused on selecting, rather than recruiting applicants, and entrance qualifications have been high (Cree et al., 2006). In recent years, however, the university has sought to widen its applicant base to all its degree programmes. This was demonstrated in the establishment, in 2004, of an admissions policy in the College of Humanities & Social Science which radically changed the minimum entrance requirements for school leavers, and made routine offers to applicants from FE colleges with HNC and HND qualifications. The 'From FE to HE' research study is one of the mechanisms through which the university is reviewing the success or otherwise of its larger widening access project, whilst at the same time, the study is making a more general contribution to knowledge about teaching, learning and assessment at FE and HE (Christie et al., 2006, 2008; Hounsell et al., forthcoming).

### **Research Design and Methodology**

'From FE to HE' is a longitudinal study centred on 45 undergraduate students with HNC and HND qualifications who entered the College of Humanities & Social Science at an ancient university in Scotland in 2004. The aim of the study is to find out from students themselves how they fare over their four years of university education, and the year following graduation. Beyond this broad aim, the study addresses a number of specific themes:

1. Experiences of teaching and learning environments, including preparedness to study; attitudes towards workload, assessment and feedback; expectations of self and others.
2. Experiences of the cultural and social environment, exploring if students feel they 'fit' at university, and what spaces are more or less accessible to them.

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3. Experiences of support systems—formal and informal, academic and non-academic, including family and friends, student services, Directors of Studies.
4. Experiences of managing the balance between home and university life.
5. Experiences of managing pressures such as financial difficulties and any other pressures (such as difficulties over language, health, mobility, geographical location).

The study uses in-depth, semi-structured interviews and standardised self-report questionnaires which were administered in the week before academic studies began; at the end of first semester/beginning of second semester; then again on an annual basis until six months after graduation. The interviews and questionnaires have been designed to focus on different questions at different points in time, reflecting the themes outlined above. All interviews have been tape-recorded and transcribed in full before being analysed using the qualitative data analysis package NVivo.

There are always limitations in any research study (Cresswell, 2009). 'From FE to HE' is a small-scale study based on the views of only 45 students. However, the findings from the interviews, as will be discussed, echo those of other qualitative studies of student experience. Moreover, the questionnaires have been modified from questionnaires developed by the Learning and Studying Questionnaire (LSQ) and the Experiences of Teaching and Learning Questionnaire (ETLQ), as part of the Enhancing Teaching–Learning Environments in Undergraduate Courses (ETL) Project ([www.ed.ac.uk/etl](http://www.ed.ac.uk/etl)). This has allowed the research team to compare the responses and experiences of our group with a much wider sample of thousands of students across the UK, giving the study much broader relevance. In addition, students were asked to give their permission for us to access student records online so that we could locate their academic progress in the context of other students on the same and different degree programmes at this university.

### *The Sample*

All 66 students who entered the College of Humanities & Social Science in 2004 with HNC/HND qualifications were invited to take part in the study. Forty-five agreed to do so, studying a range of arts and social science subjects, including Business Studies, Childhood Studies, Community Education, Law and Psychology. Nine entered the BSc (Social Work) honours degree programme (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Full Sample

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<b>Degree programme</b>	<b>Informants</b>
BSc Social Science	2
BA Childhood Studies	13
BA Community Education	4
Bed Physical Education	4
Bed Primary Education	2
BSc Sport and Recreation Management	1
MA History	1
LLB Law	3
MA Linguistics	1
MA Business Studies	1
MA Psychology	1
MA Social Anthropology & Politics	1
MA Social Policy & Law	1
BSc Social Work	9
MA Sociology & Politics	1
Total sample	45

Most of the students in the sample (82%) were women and just under half (49%) were over 30 (see Table 2). Most entered first year of studies, with the exception being the Childhood Studies' students who all entered at second year level. Again, most students (84%) were 'first generation' to attend HE; only seven (15%) had one or more parent/guardian who had attended HE. Just under 60% of the full sample were parents (n = 26), and one-third of these (n = 9) were lone parents.

Table 2. Age and Sex of Informants

<b>Age</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
Under	7	4

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20		
21–30	6	4
31–40	18	
41–50	4	
50–60	2	
Total	37	8

The nine Social Work students were similar to, and different from, the larger sample in various ways. One student entered second year of the degree programme with an HND in Social Science. All others were first year entrants, five of whom had HNCs in Health & Social Care and the other three, HNCs in Social Science. Interestingly, their age and gender profile mirrors that of a much larger study of 266 Scottish social work students conducted in 2005 (Binnie and Stewart, 2005). Eight of the nine Social Work students in our sample were women, and seven were between 30 and 50 years of age. Eight of the nine students in the Social Work group reported that they were the first people in their families to go to university. Significantly, all but one of the Social Work students in the study were parents, and half of these were lone parents. Many also said they were 'women in the middle' (Brody, 1981), caring for children and for parents who were becoming increasingly frail.

## Findings

Because this is a longitudinal study, data collection and analysis has gone on simultaneously since the first interviews and questionnaires were conducted in September 2004. Since 2004, some students have graduated successfully; some have left university before completion; some have switched to different degree programmes; others have taken time away from their studies and then returned. The end-date of the study is not expected to be until 2010, by which time all those in the study should have finished, one way or another. This means that this paper, inevitably, reports on emerging findings, rather than on outcomes of the study, and all conclusions must therefore be viewed as provisional. Nevertheless, it has been the research team's conviction that we should share the findings of the study as widely as

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possible as it progresses, because we believe it offers such useful insight into students' experiences of learning at college and university.

Starting with a 'broad brush' overview, students across the sample were mostly positive (in interviews and in questionnaires) about their experiences of teaching, learning and assessment at FE, and they expressed hope and excitement at the outset about the possibilities that HE offered. Their experiences of transition to HE were, however, found to be far from straightforward. Students felt that the university was a large and, at times, off-putting environment; the academic demands made of them were higher than they had anticipated; and they found it difficult to manage the competing demands of university study, home and family, and in many instances, paid employment. The Social Work students in the sample were no exception to this. On the contrary, their transitions were especially challenging, and at the point of writing this paper, only three of the nine students had graduated within the normal expected period of study.

This section will consider the students' experiences in more detail, exploring three topics:

- students' accounts of FE college;
- students' motivations for coming to university; and
- students' views and experiences since coming to university.

In introducing the data, the student's age and university degree programme will be identified throughout.

#### *Students' Accounts of FE College*

When students were invited at interview to look back on their time at FE college, they overwhelmingly said how much they had enjoyed FE. They had found their courses interesting and relevant to their future career aspirations. FE provided the intellectual stimulus they were looking for and, as a result, was instrumental in boosting their confidence in their ability to study at a high level. Students described their lecturers and tutors as 'friendly' and 'approachable'; they were made to feel like individuals who mattered. Many said how much they appreciated that the teaching staff were willing to be flexible and supportive during difficult periods (either when they struggled academically or when they had difficult personal circumstances). Candidate 22 (a 47-year old Social Work student) put this as follows:



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They [teaching staff] were absolutely brilliant—anything you wanted to know, if the tutors were in the College, you could call them up or you could go in, you know. They were always available. You know, you weren't sort of told, “Go on away and get on with it and come back, like, two weeks on Tuesday and I'll see you”. They were—very good.

Candidate 39 (36 years of age, studying Childhood Studies) explained further:

There were one or two occasions when I couldn't make it because, you know, I had people on holiday, somebody sick, no childcare and I just took in my children, picked up my course notes and went back away. So, they were really understanding.

There were also occasional concerns expressed about assessment procedures and the uneven nature of support available to students. Some candidates were unhappy about what they perceived to be a lack of objectivity in marking assignments that were always reviewed by staff prior to submission, and they were critical of assessment procedures which, they felt, concentrated on quantity, at the expense of quality. Candidate 16 (a Linguistics student, aged 24 years) was the most extreme in these views. She felt that continual assessment meant that ‘you couldn't really digest what you were learning’ and was ‘assessment times three’. She also felt strongly that assessment procedures were not objective, in comparison to procedures at university:

Also you're anonymous in university. If you disagree with a teacher in a tutorial or the person doesn't really like you, which you'll find anywhere, it didn't reflect on your grades. In college, I felt there was a lot of favouritism. I preferred not to get to know my lecturers—in a sense I wanted my grade to reflect my work. Some of the people in the class had over-bearing personalities and they could be pushy and would negotiate grades. I think that goes against the whole system of what I think the education system is about.

Similar views were expressed by a male Social Work student of 26 years of age. He described FE as being ‘like a mother feeding a baby’. He said he had looked forward to a more rigorous approach to teaching and assessment in HE, and to the opportunity of developing more independent approaches to learning.

Findings demonstrate that support from families was of central importance to students' success at FE, and they all recognised the conflicting demands of balancing work life and family life. As has already been outlined, the students in this study came from a range of ages and family backgrounds. This included lone parents, married parents with children, and

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younger students either living in flats or still living in the familial home. Candidate 35 (aged 31 years, studying Childhood Studies) describes the commonly expressed tension between familial support and the effects of studying on her daughter's social activities:

I couldn't have done it without my husband, my mum and my dad and my daughter. She had to give up things like swimming lessons, because I was not there to take her. I just couldn't do both.

Many students said they felt guilty about the sacrifices they made, reflecting widely held assumptions about children being best supported by a full-time mother. These gendered assumptions were internalised by many of the women, as Candidate 03 (28-years old, studying History) shows:

I was worrying about other things and then I wasn't as focused on my study. Uh, and then of course there was my daughter, not spending enough time with her, maybe getting irritable with her. She's maybe wanting more attention than I could possibly give her and I feel maybe I'm sacrificing the year. She's so young. People often say to me, "Well, I couldn't do that with a child my age because I feel when they're young, you should be giving all the time to them and oh, I couldn't go studying full-time now". Always making me feel guilty.

Students' partners were not always found to be supportive either, especially when this required some renegotiation of a traditional division of domestic labour (Bowl, 2001).

Candidate 10's time in FE (she is now 33 years and studying Community Education) was marked by problems with her relationship:

We hit serious problems towards the end of my course. We actually separated and we'd been together 10 years ... I was all for giving 100% to my course and studies and tended to forget about my husband, not my children, but I think I neglected my husband. So just having an awareness of that.

Again, financial pressures impacted upon relationships, as Candidate 19, a Social Work student of 28 years, demonstrates:

Well, I've got a rented house and was in a full-time job but there's nothing really there. You just get your loan. Of course, I already had a loan that I've had for three or four years which is £126 a month and, on top of everything else, I was trying to pay that off. I had to work all the time and didn't have one minute to myself. My partner was getting a wee bit annoyed. He'd ask if I wanted to go to the pictures or even go for a walk at night and I'd have to say, "I

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cannae, I haven't got time!" If I was in the house I was studying and if I wasn't, I'd be working. It was due to money really.

### *Students' Motivations for Coming to University*

The issue of motivation is a complex one. In choosing to come to this university, students were also choosing a specific degree programme, and some (though not all) were also choosing a definite career path. Most of the students acknowledged in interview that they had come to this university because they were attracted to studying at an 'elite' university with a good reputation. But for most students, this university was also their 'local university': they came here because either it was the only place to pursue their chosen degree programme, or because they could not afford to go anywhere else to study. [Research demonstrates that working-class students are more likely to apply to universities close to home, because of constraints on travel and finance (see Reay et al., 2001; Bartley, 2004).] Findings from the questionnaires add further illumination. The first questionnaire asked students what they expected to gain from the experience of studying at this university. The full questionnaire items are given in Table 3; the items were developed from the literature on learning orientations (Beatty et al., 1997), which classifies students' goals as vocational, academic, personal or social, and as intrinsic or extrinsic, depending on whether the students were interested in the content of the course or were studying their courses as a means to an end.

Table 3. Questionnaire items relating to reasons for pursuing university study

Career	I want to develop knowledge and skills I can use in a career.
Develop	I hope the things I learn will help me to develop as a person and broaden my horizons.
Social life	I'm focused on the opportunities here for an active social life and/or sport.
Independence	I hope the whole experience here will make me more independent and self-confident.

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Natural thing	I'm mainly here because it seemed the natural thing: I'd done well in my HN studies.
Help people	I want to learn things, which might let me help people, and/or make a difference in the world.
Interest	I want to study the subject in depth by taking interesting and stimulating courses.
Qualification	I mainly need the qualification to enable me to get a good job when I finish.
Prove myself	I want an opportunity to prove to myself or to other people what I can do.

The student group as a whole agreed most strongly with items relating to learning things that would help them to develop as people and broaden their horizons. The item relating to developing knowledge and skills that could be used in a career was also rated highly by most informants, whereas seeking a qualification mainly for the extrinsic purpose of getting a job was a less common response. The item related to 'helping other people' was rated as important by more than three-quarters of the sample. On the whole, the students tended to show more agreement with items that indicated an intrinsic interest in their studies and less with questions suggesting they had extrinsic reasons for choosing to study, mirroring 'deeper' approaches to their learning (McCune, 2004). As with approaches to learning, age appeared to have an effect on the students' orientations to learning. Older students were more likely to have an intrinsic interest in the subject they were planning to study, and less likely to be focused on opportunities for an active social life or sport. While all ages of students were keen to develop knowledge and skills they could use in a career, older students were more likely to feel they needed a qualification to get a good job.

Social Work students' responses were in line with those of the full cohort, although it should be pointed out that our primary focus of concern was their motivation to study, rather than motivation to study Social Work per se. This is, of course, a different order of question;

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successive studies have demonstrated that there are many factors in people's backgrounds which may be seen as motivating factors in choosing a career in social work (see Christie, 1998; Cree, 2003; Hackett et al., 2003; D'Aprix et al., 2004; Cree and Davis, 2007; Wilson and McCrystal, 2007). Unsurprisingly, the Social Work students in our study all saw 'helping other people' as of primary importance, mirroring the findings of a recent Scottish study of career motivation in which 82% of social work students said that they had chosen social work because 'it was a rewarding job or a job that helps those in need' (Binnie and Stewart, 2005). Students in our sample also described more personal reasons for beginning their Social Work degree programmes. For example, Candidate 27 said that he grew up with an alcoholic father and was studying Social Work because he wanted to 'use his experience as a kid to help others'. Similarly, Candidate 12 explained why she had chosen Social Work:

It's a million dollar question. Sometimes I can answer it and sometimes I can't. I just think I could make a difference to people [as a social worker]. I think through my own life experiences being a teenage mum, being a lone parent, divorce, I've seen social problems and I've managed to be on the good side of it. Some people manage to slip through the net but my life has been a positive experience of that. I am a very "people person". I enjoy people and to go and see a different way of life as well. I've been fortunate in my life.

The one item on the questionnaire which showed a marked difference from the full sample of HN students was 'opportunities for a more active social life and/or sport'. Whilst over one-quarter of the full sample listed this as important to them, only one of the Social Work students gave this any priority, presumably because as an older group, these students were far too busy managing family life, study and (often) paid work to take part in sport or leisure activities. Again, it is acknowledged that we cannot generalise on the basis of such a small sample, but this is a familiar profile of social work students in Scotland (see Binnie and Stewart, 2005) and also demonstrated in the studies of career motivation cited above.

#### *Students' Views and Experiences since Coming to University*

The study has now met students each year from the 2004 entry onwards, hearing (through interview) their accounts of being at university and following their learning journeys through repeated self-completed questionnaires and investigation of their academic progress. There is not space here to give a detailed presentation of all our findings; three published papers are already available (Christie et al., 2006, 2008; Hounsell et al., forthcoming). Instead, we will

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draw out the main themes which have emerged, focusing again on the Social Work students in the sample.

For students across the whole sample (and Social Work students were no exception), the transition to university was 'daunting'. The sheer scale of the university was off-putting: the large, spread-out campus; the lecture theatres with 300 plus students; the vast array of course choices; and then there was the library—'the biggest library I've ever seen in my life', said a 35-year old, female Social Work student. Some students said they found their new situation 'horrendous' and 'stressful', others thought 'it was a rollercoaster of confidence and emotions' (47-year old Social Work student) and described themselves as, at best, 'coping'. For the majority of informants, the difficulties lay in making the transition to a new teaching and learning environment and, in common with other studies of student learning, they documented a process of 'learning shock' as they entered the university (Gallagher et al., 2002; Griffiths et al., 2005). It was therefore fairly typical for informants to describe coming to university as a 'huge culture change and a huge shock', to the extent that many regarded the first semester 'as a total write-off' (the views of a 27-year old Law student, who left the university at the end of her first year).

The picture which emerges is one of dislocation and loss, as students found themselves less prepared for study at university than they had hoped they might be. They found their new degree programmes stimulating and challenging, but the lack of experience in formal examinations and the different approaches to assessment and support for learning caused them anxiety. This was reported by a 47-year old Social Work student as follows:

College was too easy. You were too well supported—right? Here you're just—it's basically, "There you go, and away and do it". I enjoyed it [FE] because it was so easy. But because it was so easy, you were spoon-fed and you didn't, unless you wanted to, go and find stuff out, unless it was part of the work you had to do.

Some of the technical demands, including information technology, use of computers and writing and bibliographical convention were also stressful for students. As one 40-year old Social Work student explained:

The essays are hard because it's university and you have to lay it out in a special way.

Everything has to be perfect, whereas in college you just got away with doing it the way that you did it.

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These problems inevitably lessened over time for those students who were able to stay 'on course'. The aspect which proved least demanding for the FE cohort from the outset was the expectation that they should work with other students, because this was familiar to them from their previous studies. Many students identified peer support as crucial in helping them to make the transition from the supportive environment of FE to the less 'hands on' environment at university. Our informants reported that they enjoyed meeting other students and they spoke about the difference it made when you had someone with whom to share the university experience. One student suggested that it took 'the whole of the first semester to realise how important it is to talk to each other and share because ... it has really made such a difference' (a Social Work student, aged 35 years). Friendships with peers were particularly important when students were struggling with their academic work, and at times like this, age ceased to be of concern to the older students. For example, one 47-year old Social Work student said that as her studies had progressed, she had started to appreciate that she knew quite a lot of things that the young people didn't, and that the young ones looked to her for support, 'particularly in the tutorials'. She and some other younger students had formed their own informal study group as a way of preparing better for the academic demands.

We are now four years into this study, and, unlike most research which simply records the moment of transition to HE, we can now reflect on the students' experiences over a longer period. In a comparison between our sample of students and the student body as a whole on each degree programme, the evidence is that our sample has fared no better and no worse than other students on their academic courses. Some students scored grades which were considerably higher than the course mean; some achieved middling grades; others had disappointingly low results as compared with the course mean. No pattern could be found to this, so that it is not possible to make any generalisations in relation to specific degree programmes. The results, however, give some grounds for optimism, because they suggest that HN students who stay 'on course' are not significantly different from their peers in the university.

A more worrying feature is the broken progression of a considerable number of students. Of the 45 students who began in the study, eight had left the university by 2008. This seems, at first sight, a high 'drop-out' rate. The university's most recent statistics for permanent withdrawal is 3.3% for young students and 10.4% for mature students (internal 2004 figures).

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Figures for our study look worse because they have been accumulated over a three-year period. Of course, not all of this academic breakdown can be placed at the door of the university; events and people in students' wider lives inevitably have a major impact on their experience of study (Archer and Leathwood, 2003; Archer et al., 2003; Davies and Elias, 2003; Furlong et al., 2003; Moriarty et al., forthcoming). Moreover, the decision to leave university is not always a negative one, as other research suggests (Christie et al., 2004; Kemmer, 2005).

It is also important to highlight that it is not only HN students who experience difficult transitions to university. School-leavers and mature students from different educational backgrounds can and do struggle with the transition to university, as illustrated in other research studies (Archer et al., 2003; Dumbleton et al., 2008). This is not simply a working-class phenomenon, although it may be experienced most acutely by working-class students (Tett, 2000, 2004; Reay et al., 2001). Nonetheless, the experience of the nine Social Work students in the HN group does merit further consideration. The students' progression has been as follows:

1. one student successfully graduated in 2007 (this student began second year with 'advanced entry');
2. two students successfully completed the four-year degree and graduated in 2008;
3. one student is currently undertaking a repeat fieldwork placement and should graduate in 2009;
4. one student repeated first year and should also graduate in 2009;
5. two students switched degree programmes before withdrawing from university after failing to progress to Honours' level at the end of second year;
6. one student withdrew from university last year, first temporarily and then permanently, after a series of re-sit examinations;
7. one student left the university before sitting any examinations in first year.

Although such a small sample size must be treated with caution, the students' chequered progression raises a number of questions for the UK FE and HE sectors alike. Fundamentally, what might FE colleges do to prepare students better for the realities of university-level study? Alongside this, what might universities do to support FE students better, and to value the experience which they bring? There is some evidence that universities are, to a greater or



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lesser degree, attempting to put in place better mechanisms for supporting 'non-traditional' social work students (see Thomas et al., 2002; Dumbleton et al., 2008; GSCC, 2008; Moriarty et al., forthcoming). There are also initiatives which have the potential to improve the experience of all university students, for example, the introduction of Individual Learning Plans, which seek to map a learning route for each student from beginning to end of their studies.<sup>2</sup>

But our study raises another, more controversial, question. Are all those with HN qualifications academically able to take on the intellectual challenge of an Honours degree programme? Leading on from this, what does social work as a profession need and want of its members? It is vital that an open dialogue now takes place which addresses these questions and which draws on the views of all those who should have a say in the profession of social work: educators at FE and HE, practitioners and those who use services.

## **Recommendations**

Whilst this dialogue takes place, we would like to offer some tentative recommendations which, we believe, could quickly improve the experiences of HN students at university, and indeed the experiences of all university students.

### *At FE College Level*

1. Students would benefit from more practice at unseen examinations and formal essay writing (where students' own work is graded), and more opportunities for independent study.
2. There is a need for greater transparency by college tutors about candidates' academic abilities at the point of their application to university.

### *Bridging FE–HE*

1. Students have been found to benefit greatly from short orientation courses which run before formal academic study commences. Research in relation to school leavers (LEAPS, 2007) and FE college students (Knox, 2005) demonstrates this.

### *At University Level*

1. Students would appreciate more support and guidance—through mentoring schemes, peer support and tutorials. A raft of research demonstrates this, including Thomas et al. (2002).

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2. The introduction of Individual Learning Plans, as already stated, offers students the possibility of a clear 'roadmap' through their studies.
3. Students would also like better and more feedback on their assessed work. This was highlighted in the findings of the 2008 National Student Survey.<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has identified that students coming to university with Higher National qualifications from an FE background face considerable challenges at an elite university such as this one. They have been recruited to HE, in part, for ideological reasons (that is, to widen participation), without, we have suggested, sufficient or adequate preparation in either FE or HE. The Social Work students who come from FE face an uphill struggle, as older students, as predominantly female and working-class students, and as HN-educated students. Ancient universities such as this one could and should do more to support all their students, not just the 'non-traditional' entrants. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the shift from a diploma-level qualification to Honours degree in the UK, whilst meeting social work's professionalisation agenda, may also have raised the bar to entry to the profession too high for some students, as the students who withdrew from the university in our research study demonstrate. This raises major issues about what kind of a profession that we, in social work, wish to be a part of.

## Notes

1. The Russell Group is a group of older, pre-1992, research-led universities in the UK. See 'Widening Participation in Russell Group Universities', available from: [www.russellgroup.ac.uk/news/2004/widening-participation-in-russell-group-universities.html/](http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/news/2004/widening-participation-in-russell-group-universities.html/).
2. See [www.niace.org.uk/projects/learningfromexperience/EBS/Good-Practice/](http://www.niace.org.uk/projects/learningfromexperience/EBS/Good-Practice/), accessed 19 December 2008.
3. The National Student Survey (NSS) is targeted at final year undergraduates in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and participating HEIs in Scotland with the aim of helping students to make more informed choices about where and what to study at university. Its fourth year results were published in September 2008. See [www.thestudentsurvey.com/](http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/), accessed 19 December 2008.

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